

Wall Street Journal

Opinion

Presbyterians Join the Anti-Israel Choir

Divesting from companies like Motorola Solutions to show solidarity with the Palestinians.

By

Jonathan Marks

June 22, 2014 6:34 p.m. ET

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is bleeding members. Between 2000 and 2013, almost 765,000 members left the organization, a loss of nearly 30%. Last week the church's leadership met in Detroit for crisis talks.

No, not about the emptying-pews crisis. The Israel-Palestinian crisis.

On Friday, in a close vote (310-303), the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—the largest of several Presbyterian denominations in America—resolved to divest the organization's stock in [Caterpillar](#), [Hewlett-Packard](#) and [Motorola Solutions](#). The church's Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment said the companies have continued to "profit from their involvement in the occupation and the violation of human rights in the region," and have even "deepened their involvement in roadblocks to a just peace." Israel's counterterrorism and defense measures have included razing Palestinian houses (with Caterpillar equipment), operating Gaza and West Bank checkpoints (with Hewlett-Packard technology), and utilizing military communications and surveillance (with Motorola Solutions technology).

The church signaled its antipathy for Israel earlier this year by hawking a study guide called "Zionism Unsettled" in its online church store. In the 76-page pamphlet, Zionism—the movement to establish a Jewish homeland and nation-state in the historic land of Israel—is characterized as a "a struggle for colonial and racist supremacist privilege."

In a postscript to "Zionism Unsettled," Naim Ateek, a Palestinian priest and member of the Anglican Church, explains the meaning of the charges in the pamphlet. "It is the equivalent of declaring Zionism heretical, a doctrine that fosters both political and theological injustice. This is the strongest condemnation that a Christian confession can make against any doctrine that promotes death rather than life."



Members of the Presbyterian Church of the Big Wood in Ketchum, Idaho on June 1. Reuters

In one response, Katharine Henderson, president of New York's Auburn Theological Seminary, said in February that the "premise of the document appears to be that Zionism is the cause of the entire conflict in the Middle East," in essence "the original sin, from which flows all the suffering of the Palestinian people." And amid intense criticism of the study guide from the Anti-Defamation League and other groups, the church's General Assembly declared on Wednesday that " 'Zionism Unsettled' does not represent the views of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." But the assembly didn't bar the church from continuing to distribute and sell it.

The divestment resolution that ultimately passed included language affirming Israel's right to exist and denying that divesting from the three companies is tantamount to alignment with the broader Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. Still, the vote is a victory for anti-Israel forces within the church. And the divestment vote hardly means that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is ready to shift its focus: The organization's Middle East Issues Committee sees only one Middle East issue. All 14 of the matters before it this year concerned Israel and Palestine. No Syria. No Iraq.

Another vote regarding Palestinian-Israeli matters by the church's General Assembly, seemingly more innocuous, is actually more disturbing. The vote instructed the church's Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to prepare a report to help the General Assembly reconsider its commitment to a two-state solution and to create a study guide "that will help inform the whole church of the situation on the ground in Palestine."

In its "advice and counsel" on an anti-divestment proposal, the committee voiced its support for the boycott-Israel movement, compared Israel with apartheid-era South Africa and declared Israel responsible for its own "de-legitimation." It complained that the anti-divestment proposal "prioritize[d] Israel's security and underline[d] the flaws of Hamas and other 'hostile' neighbors without noting the constant violence of the occupation." Even with respect to Hamas, whose charter commits it to the destruction of Israel, the committee felt compelled to put "hostile" in scare quotes. The committee has some history on this score: In 2004, it drew widespread condemnation for meeting with leaders of the terrorist organization Hezbollah.

The General Assembly instructed the advisory committee that the new study guide should "honestly point out" that "simple financial investment in a completely occupied land where the occupiers are relentless and unwavering regarding their occupation is not enough to dismantle the matrix of that occupation or dramatically change the vast majority of communities or individual lives that are

bowed and broken by systematic and intentional injustice." The vote to commission the guide was 482-88.

With a dwindling membership, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) clearly needs new friends, but the church does itself no favors by courting Israel's enemies.

Mr. Marks is a professor of politics at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pa.